

Observations on the „War Scare“ of 1983
From an Intelligence Perch

By Fritz W. Ermarth

We are “celebrating” the 20th anniversary of the “war scare” of 1983, one of the most fascinating and enigmatic episodes of the Cold War. This has occasioned a number of commentaries, publication of newly available documents especially from the Eastern side, and recollection of previous histories on Johnsons Russia List, the Parallel History Project, and others. Numerous writers have characterized the “war scare” as the most dangerous period in the Cold War after the Cuban missile crisis.

My view of this episode is somewhat different as I shall explain below. I apologize to historians who already know this material; but I think it may be new to many interested readers, and, I hope, contains some fresh points of use to historians.

On 2 January 1984 I rejoined CIA after some years at the NSC staff and in private industry to become the NIO/USSR. Almost immediately, I was directed by Robert Gates, then holding the positions of Deputy Director for Intelligence of CIA and Chairman of the National Intelligence Council, to undertake a Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) on all aspects of the palpably tense situation in US-Soviet relations, focusing primarily on a variety of unusual or potentially threatening military activities by the Soviet side.

Doing this SNIE provided most of my perspective on the “war scare”, then and now. Entitled “Implications of Recent Soviet Military-Political Activities” (SNIE 11-10-84/JX, dated 18 May 1984), this document has since been almost entirely declassified. From the main text, numerous short passages have been excised because of sensitivity with respect to intelligence sources and methods. Still, it displays the broad range of issues we addressed: military moves, but also propaganda trends, diplomatic developments, Soviet leadership perceptions; and amply discloses the evidence and reasoning that led to our conclusions. The Key Judgments presenting those conclusions have been declassified entirely. They represent the burden of my case, and deserve citation in full:

KEY JUDGMENTS

During the past several months, a number of coincident Soviet activities have created concern that they reflect abnormal Soviet fear of conflict with the United States, belligerent intent that might risk conflict, or some other underlying Soviet purpose. These activities have included large-scale military exercises (among them a major naval exercise in the Norwegian Sea, unprecedeted SS-20 launch activity, and large-scale SSBN dispersal); preparations for air operations against Afghanistan; attempts to change the air corridor regime in Berlin; and shrill propaganda attributing a heightened danger of war to US behavior.

Examining these developments in terms of several hypotheses, we reach the following conclusions:

We believe strongly that Soviet actions are not inspired by, and Soviet leaders do not perceive, a genuine danger of imminent conflict or confrontation with the United States. This judgment is based on the absence of forcewide combat readiness or other war preparation moves in the USSR, and the absence of a tone of fear or belligerence in Soviet diplomatic communications, although the latter remain uncompromising on many issues. There have been instances where the Soviets appear to have avoided belligerent propaganda or actions. Recent Soviet "war scare" propaganda, of declining intensity over the period examined, is aimed primarily at discrediting US policies and mobilizing "peace" pressures among various audiences abroad. This war scare propaganda has reverberated in Soviet security bureaucracies and emanated through other channels such as human sources. We do not believe it reflects authentic leadership fears of imminent conflict.

We do not believe that Soviet war talk and other actions "mask" Soviet preparations for an imminent move toward confrontation on the part of the USSR, although they have an incentive to take initiatives that discredit US policies even at some risk. Were the Soviets preparing an initiative they believed carried a real risk of military confrontation with the United States, we would see preparatory signs which the Soviets could not mask.

Soviet actions examined are influenced to some extent by Soviet perceptions of a mounting challenge from US foreign and defense policy. However, these activities do not all fit into an integrated pattern of current Soviet foreign policy tactics.

Each Soviet action has its own military or political purpose sufficient to explain it. Soviet military exercises are designed to meet long-term requirements for force development and training which become ever more complex with the growth of Soviet military capabilities.

In specific cases, Soviet military exercises are probably intended to have the ancillary effect of signaling Soviet power and resolve to some audience. For instance, maneuvers in the Tonkin Gulf were aimed at backing Vietnam against China; Soviet airpower use in Afghanistan could have been partly aimed at intimidating Pakistan; and Soviet action on Berlin has the effect of reminding the West of its vulnerable access, but very low-key Soviet handling has muted this effect.

Taken in their totality, Soviet talk about the increased likelihood of nuclear war and Soviet military actions do suggest a political intention of speaking with a louder voice and showing firmness through a controlled display of military muscle. The apprehensive outlook we believe the Soviet leadership has toward the longer term US arms buildup could in the future increase its willingness to consider actions – even at some heightened risk – that recapture the initiative and neutralize the challenge posed by the United States.

These judgments are tempered by some uncertainty as to current Soviet leadership perceptions of the United States, by continued uncertainty about Politburo decision making processes, and by our inability at this point to conduct a detailed examination of how the Soviets might have assessed recent US/NATO military exercises and reconnaissance operations. Notwithstanding these uncertainties, however, we are confident that, as of now, the Soviets see not an imminent military clash but a costly and – to some extent – more perilous strategic and political struggle over the rest of the decade.

Some further comments and observations are in order:

When I started to preside over this estimate (the real work and expertise came from analysts all over the intelligence community, including in this case overseas commands), I had been detached from the details of our intelligence on Soviet and Warsaw Pact military forces since the mid-1970s. I was astonished and enormously gratified to learn how much it had improved in the intervening years. Some recent commentaries (notably in PHP) on the “war scare” have revealed how much the East knew about NATO war plans and posture. In January 1984, I learned that we knew a lot about Soviet and Warsaw Pact war plans. In effect, we had many of their military cook books. This permitted us to judge confidently the difference between when they might be brewing up for a real military confrontation or, as one wag put it, just rattling their pots and pans. It allowed us to distinguish between isolated if purposeful military moves, mere anomalies, and real military preparations for large scale warfare. As the Key Judgments make clear, we saw the former, not the latter.

For intelligence history buffs, it is worth noting that this was an episode where classical human intelligence operations (espionage) contributed crucially to the vital cause of keeping the Cold War cold. Much of our knowledge was based on documentary materials collected by spies. Another point of possible interest to his-

torians: Note that the date on this SNIE is 18 May 1984 (11-10-84/JX is a serial number, not a date). By this time, the judgments in this estimate had long since been reported to and ingested by the leadership of the intelligence community and by top policymakers. And the “war scare” had largely passed. In a sense, the document itself, as are many nation intelligence estimates, was somewhat for the record. In cases like this, the process of producing such estimates is what is important. That process double checks data, triple checks judgments, and surfaces disputes which need to be scrubbed down. Had the analysts around the community on whose judgments and expertise this estimate rested been more alarmed, we would have produced it much faster.

In later years, I got personal confirmation that our conclusions were on the mark, namely that what animated Soviet behavior and discontent was not fear of an imminent military confrontation but worry that Soviet economic and technological weaknesses and Reagan policies were turning the “correlation of forces” against them on an historic scale. This was the essence of a long conversation I had, after he’d come in from the cold, with Oleg Gordievskiy, who had been a very worried observer in 1983. He noted, interestingly, that intelligence professionals on the Soviet side did not take seriously the much ballyhooed warning system called VRYAN or RYAN; it seemed more like a political instrument to energize the geriatric Politburo.

At the close of the decade, while researching his book on the end of the Cold War, Don Oberdorfer interviewed the late Marshal Sergei Akhromeyev. The Marshal reported that he’d never heard of “Able Archer”, the NATO nuclear CPX that supposedly triggered the alerting of a nuclear-capable strike fighter regiment in the GDR and is widely cited as the peak of the “war scare.” At the time Akhromeyev was chief of the main operations directorate of the Soviet General Staff. If it had been cause for serious alarm, he above all people would have known about it and been in the chain of command that ordered a response. I understand that Ray Garthoff drew similar blanks from interviews with senior Soviet political figures in his researches. Evidently, the “war scare” did not involve real fear of war on the Soviet side, as we indeed concluded.

One of the more worrisome features of this whole affair is alluded to in the last paragraph of the Key Judgments cited above: “...our inability...to conduct a detailed assessment of how the Soviets might have assessed recent US/NATO military exercises and reconnaissance operations.” We had an abundance of intelligence on the Red side, but our ability to assess it was hampered by lack of knowledge about potentially threatening Blue activities we knew or suspected were going on. This is a classic difficulty and danger for

Soviet internal weaknesses throughout this period. Before long this process produced Gorbachev, us-koryeniye, perestroika, glasnost, and the end of the Cold War, the Soviet Bloc, and the USSR.

So I contend, we got it right: The US did not intend to attack the USSR, and Moscow perceived no such intention. Moscow did not intend to attack nor start a confrontation that could lead to war. Our getting it right was important and had important consequences. Had we got it wrong by letting all the sound and fury of the time distract us from the hard facts, we might have had a real war scare and possibly worse.

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intelligence, particularly at the national level. Our leaders in intelligence and defense must strive to overcome it, particularly in confrontational situations.

In the late 1980s, the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB) directed a thorough, highly classified review of the case. It was conducted by a very able young lady named Nina Stewart. It was lengthy and concluded by indicting us, the authors of the SNIE, for being dangerously relaxed. I retorted that we were being indicted for being right, alas, not the first or last time this has happened in intelligence work. If it hasn't already been, her report should be declassified as much as possible. I'll stick by the conclusions of the SNIE. But the historical work done since then suggests Nina had a point, and it is worth pursuing further.

Although the "war scare" was not, in my view, as scary as it seemed at the time or as depicted in belatedly-revealed contemporaneous materials (themselves artifacts of the misplaced "scare"), it was still a seminal and very interesting period of the Cold War.

On the US side, it definitely helped persuade Ronald Reagan that the time had come for a new opening with the Soviets and new probes for what he called real détente. He made his first move in a major speech in early January 1984. This was reciprocated by Chernyenko in March. Later that year, Gromyko came to Washington and a whole new ball game commenced.

Some have written that this change of tack by Reagan was the product of pressuring by the First Lady and Michael Deaver with an eye to the up-coming elections. My own sense of the President from later interactions was that it was more the product of his own actor's sense of timing. By early 1984, he'd turned the rhetorical and ideological tables on Moscow, had got America "standing tall" again in terms of military image (e.g., budgets, SDI, etc), and concluded the time had come to start looking for deals that would make the relationship with the Soviets saner and safer. His ear for domestic politics surely played a role. But his eye was on the strategic competition.

I suspect that the "war scare" played an even more important role on the Soviet side by intensifying the leadership's introspection and debates about the need for and possibility of internal reforms that would restore the competitiveness of the Soviet system, and also the need for foreign policy moves that would mute or keep at bay the American challenge. Marshal Ogarkov was sounding the tocsin about the military dangers of

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